



DEMOCRACY FORUM 2026

Call for Papers

“Role and place of Trust in building a substantive Democracy”.

Nairobi, Kenya, July 2 – 3, 2026.

The international system today with, fake news, conspiracy theories, turn out, not voting, unilateral military actions in Ukraine, Iran, Venezuela without legal basis or international law consideration, have made us rediscover the existential relevance of trust for democracy (Warren 2018). This feeling of democratic disenchantment partly result of dysfunctional and often corrupt democratic systems (Akhatira, Moreira and Trucco 2022), radical changes between electoral real promises and political actions of elected authorities (Novak and Krasovec 2025), which have undermined democracy's promise (Mbembe 2023), is shared in many parts of the world (Theuwis, Van Ham and Jacobs 2025). At its core Democracy relies on citizens engaging in politics and trusting the political system (elections, legal protection, electoral promises), but we witness nowadays countries declining levels of political trust (Fink-Hafner 2025) and satisfaction (Nun, Qian and Wen 2023). Several factors which account for such low levels of trust (Jack and Stoker 2018), such as disappointment with service provision and narratives that politicians do not tell the truth or act with integrity (Babos and Vilagi 2024).

Substantive Democracy is based on actions, processes and mechanism to achieve equitable outcomes, social justice, and meaningful citizen participation, rather than just procedural rituals like voting (Schedler 2019). It then focuses on substantive equality (Mbembe 2020), protecting human rights (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019), reducing socioeconomic disparities, and ensuring that the government policies actively serve common good (Kis 2022) and empower marginalized groups (Uslaner 1999). The electoral process, adherence to laws, the payment of taxes, and use of basic public services all depend on the extent to which individuals trust the institutions in charge, so institutional trust is an essential tool for the functioning of societies (Blajer de la Garza 2019).

The security of our societies really extends beyond just defending against threats (Martinez 2022). It includes social cohesion and the ability of citizens to cooperate in pursuit of common goals, in a word, trust (Alberta 2022). Democratic comprehensive



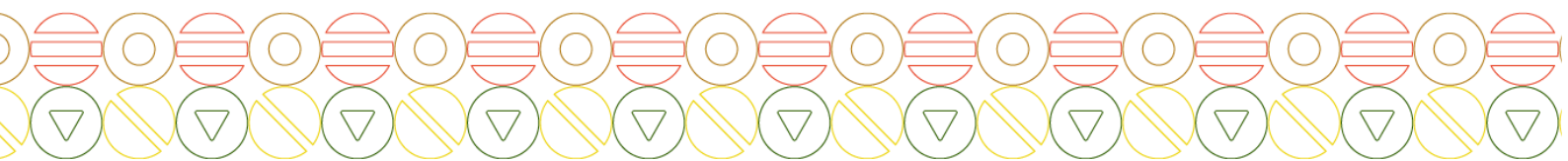


security requires an integrated political approach in which all sectors and operators contribute their specific expertise (Inglehart 1999). To prepare for the systemic risks we face, investing in trust is the key strategic move to enhance our resilience (Kloppe-Santamaria 2021). Trust is built from local relationships within intermediary bodies (families, friendships, associations, clubs) and through local politics (Cohen 1999). To meet the systemic challenges of modern democracies we must strengthen the role of intermediary bodies and local politics.

At time when complexity is reaching unprecedented levels in the world and in Africa particularly (fight for resources, cultural issues, digital governance) trust is more necessary than ever (Mbembe 2021). The more complex the issues, the more we must rely on the work of others without being able to control or verify everything (Scott 1999). Strengthening trust within society is the most effective way to address the systemic challenges of our time (Nguyen 2022). High levels of trust among people and institutions is what makes democratic systems functional (Mbembe 2022) and ensure security (Le Rossignol, Lowes and Montero 2022).

For Pierre Rosanvallon trust is an “invisible institution” much like authority and legitimacy. It is an institution because it fosters integration, cooperation and regulation, structuring the social world. It is invisible because it is not defined by rules or statutes. Invisible institutions such as trust are essential for functioning of society. Trust is the oil of the democratic engine, it coordinates the actions of public and private actors, synchronises social endeavours, and amplifies the impact of every citizen. The capital of trust existing between citizens (Offe 1999), between citizen and their institutions, and between different institutional actors and nations enables policies, reforms, measures, and strategies to achieve their objectives. This critical aspect of trust in substantive democracy building is shared by Massimiliano Mascherini, he says trust is the “glue” that holds us together; it is the force of the social contract and the bedrock of democracy. Trust foster cooperation, strengthens social cohesion, facilitates policy engagement and participation (Butler, Giuliano and Guiso 2016). Without trust, societies fall victim to social fragmentation, which cripple cooperation and can empower populism, thereby undermining the stability and well-functioning of our societies during periods of geopolitical confrontation (Ezcurra 2021).

After the Democracy Forum of July 2025 on the state of civic space, governance and democratic expression across East Africa, organized with the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), the Oriental Laboratory of the Innovation Foundation for Democracy, continues its’ quest with an **Democracy Forum** to take stock of the accumulated knowledge and to discuss on the importance of trust to sustain substantive democracy in East Africa, Africa and the World. We invite scholars, researchers, civil society, activist, community leaders, influencers, to take part in the conference. We welcome papers engaging with theoretical and empirical questions related to trust as foundational “social glue” of substantive democracy and employing diverse methodological approaches. Among others, we are interested on key aspects of trust in substantive democracy in the following panels topics:





- **Panel 1: Re-Defining and Re-considering the concept of Trust (structure, types of relations, domains, grounds and opposites) in Africa: Rebuilding the Trust loop and Measuring trust.**

Understanding the notion of trust and how its' implemented in Africa by social authorities to rebuild the trust loop. Try to understand how to help social authorities to clarify their commitments, follow up promptly and respond openly so people feel safe and valued in every interaction. Also try to reconsider in African context how to *close the loop* (by follow up promises or questions so everyone knows where things stand and feels respected) *show consistency* (keep actions and messages reliable even under pressure to reassure and strengthen trust) and *communicate clearly* (being specific on what is happening and uncertainties helping to reduce anxiety and builds credibility). Trust encourages citizens to participate, while transparent and ethical behavior from leaders strengthens that trust.

- **Panel 2: Institutional trust for substantive democracy**

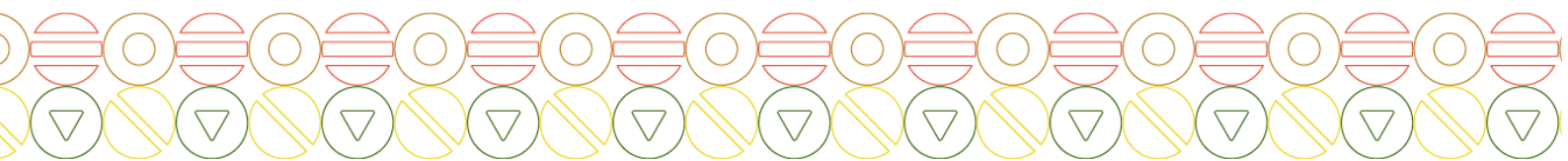
Confidence in the reliability, integrity and responsiveness of public institutions is critical. How institutions (justice, Religion, political, administration, security, economic, traditional or customary) consider trust in their decision making process? Are they concern by the low level of trust in East Africa, Africa, Europe, Asia, America? Globally how institutions react to the sensitive question of trust in the implementation of Democracy?

- **Panel 3: Social, gender-based Trust for substantive democracy**

Cohesion among citizens enables a functioning of society; *substantive equality and social justice* (addressing systemic inequalities to ensure equality of outcomes not just opportunities), *active participation* (going beyond voting to ensure all citizens can engage in decision-making), *protection of rights* (guaranteeing fundamental human, civil and socioeconomic rights for all members of society), *accountability and outcomes* (focusing on the tangible impact of policies on people's lives), *Inclusivity* (promoting the inclusion of minority voices and marginalized communities in the political process, women, youngsters, LGBT, disables etc...).

- **Panel 4: Role of trust in strengthening Substantive democracy**

Legitimizing governance (high trust environments allow government to act effectively and make difficult decisions whereas low trust impedes governance) *improving socioeconomic outcomes* (Trust is linked to better economic performance), and *combating misinformation* (Trustworthy media serves as an independent arbiter, ensuring the public is informed and reducing the influence of polarization); *foster cooperation, strengthens social cohesion, facilitates*





policy engagement and participation (avoid social fragmentation, populism, undermining the stability).

- **Panel 5: Re-Building and maintaining trust for implementation of substantive democracy**

Citizen engagement (involving citizens directly in decision-making through mechanisms like citizens' assemblies helps rebuild trust) *ethical leadership and rights* (Ensuring government integrity and protecting civil liberties ensures that citizens trust the system's fairness), and *addressing inequity* (reducing poverty and creating equitable economic opportunities fosters trust in a fair democracy). The *role of intermediary bodies*, local authorities and local politics in the building of trust.

Important Submission Deadlines

Call for Papers: April 15, 2026

Deadline for submission: May 30, 2026

Notification of acceptance: June 2, 2026

Submission of first Draft full article: June 25, 2026

Democracy Forum: July 2 - 3, 2026

Submission rules

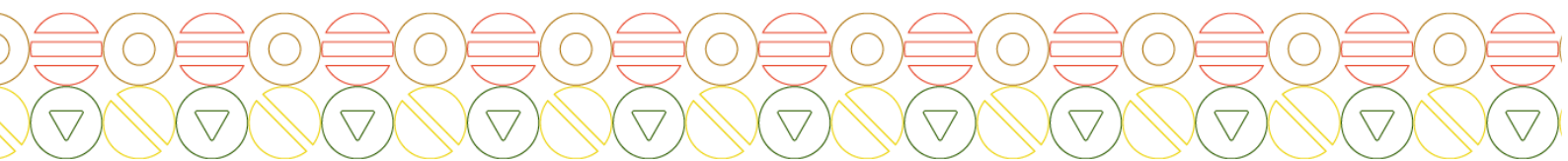
Theoretical and empirical contributions are welcome but should not be published elsewhere. Documents are accepted in English only. File in Word format.

Contributions should be anonymous except for the first page which must include:

- A title page: concise and informative title (With the indication of the chosen panel)
- The name of the authors, affiliation (s) and e-mail addresses.
- A short summary (200 words maximum)
- Key words (5 maximum).

2 formats are possible:

Classic contribution: 5 pages maximum, Times New Roman 12, 1.5 line spacing and 2.5 margins excluding the title page, contact information for the author(s), bibliographic references, and appendices, presenting research conceptually and/or empirically advanced. The article should clearly show the following elements: introduction and objectives, research question, conceptual





framework, method, results, discussion with theoretical and managerial implications, limits and research avenues, references, appendices.

Work-in-progress contribution: 5 pages maximum, Times New Roman 12, 1.5 line spacing and 2.5 margins excluding the title page, contact information for the author(s), bibliographic references, and appendices, presenting research in progress. Questions can be formulated clearly at the end of the document in order to be discussed during the presentation.

Please apply by sending a **paper proposal (c. 500 words)** to easternlabs@innovationdemocratie.org with cc to cheptum.toroitich@innovationdemocratie.org no later than **May 30, 2026**.

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